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**STATEMENT ON THE NATION'S REPORT CARD:
*Writing 2011, Grades 8 and 12***

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For almost a decade, I have been involved in two major projects to define the reading and writing skills students should attain to graduate from high school and successfully enter college or the workforce. I was one of the principal designers of the American Diploma Project, aimed at closing the gaps between high school demands and postsecondary expectations. I also led the English language arts and literacy team responsible for developing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that have now been adopted by 46 states.

Although there are differences between them, the Common Core State Standards draw on important elements from the NAEP writing framework. For example, similar to NAEP, the Common Core stresses the development of three mutually reinforcing writing capacities: argumentative writing, explanatory writing, and writing to convey real or imagined experience. Evidence on the demands of college and career readiness gathered during development of the Common Core supports the emphases in NAEP. The Common Core standards for grades 9–12 describe writing in all three forms, but, consistent with NAEP, the overwhelming focus in high school is on writing arguments and informative/explanatory texts.

There are other ways that the Common Core is following the lead of NAEP, including the balance of texts—from literary to informational—that students should be reading and, beginning in elementary grades, the expectation that students will compose their writing on a computer.

The NAEP 2011 Writing Assessment is the first NAEP assessment conducted on computers—a harbinger of what we can expect on the CCSS assessments. Some people in the nation have expressed concern about the plans to assess student writing on computers, suggesting that their introduction will create another layer of errors and possible unfairness that may mask deeper issues. Yet the results of the 2011 NAEP Writing Assessment show students with the same strengths and weaknesses that paper-and-pencil tests revealed in the past:

- At both grades 8 and 12, a little more than half of the nation’s students write at the *Basic* achievement level, the standard of partial mastery for their grade. They can get their main points across clearly, but the prose is not skillfully crafted and displays some confusion and mistakes in word choice and grammar. According to the rubrics used to score these responses, the writing is merely “adequate.”
- Only 24 percent—or just about one-quarter—of the nation’s students in both grades scored at the *Proficient* level. As the scoring rubrics explain, writing at a *Proficient* level means that the response is thoughtful, well organized, and coherent, with appropriate connections and transitions. Words are chosen carefully, and details and other evidence clearly and logically support conclusions.
- Finally, like results on earlier assessments performed without computers, only a very small proportion of students—3 percent at each grade— write at the *Advanced* achievement level. That is a standard for excellence and consistency.

The NAEP background data show that students who use computers more frequently to draft and revise their writing scored higher on the assessment; students whose teachers never asked them to draft and revise their writing on a computer scored the lowest. With word-processing software, text can be added, deleted, and moved easily. Furthermore, students who write using a computer can access software tools, such as a thesaurus and spell check, to enhance their written compositions. Interestingly, students who used the thesaurus the most had much higher average scores; those using spell check the most scored much lower than those using it less or not at all.

As Commissioner Buckley has explained, the NAEP Writing Assessment not only was computer-based for the first time, but also was prepared from a new framework and employed a new scale for reporting scores. No link has been constructed to connect the new scale with student performance on previous NAEP writing assessments, so there is no way to tell whether student writing has improved or not. But the main patterns in the results are familiar—not only the gap between *Basic* and *Proficient*, but also the gaps regularly observed by race/ethnicity, by poverty, and by parent education.

One continuing gap that stands out starkly is the especially wide difference in writing performance between girls and boys—or between young women and young men, as the 12th-graders likely prefer to be called. At 12th grade, 33 percent of female students scored at or above *Proficient*, compared to 21 percent of males. The gap is even starker in eighth grade, where 36 percent of females reach the *Proficient* level or above compared to only 17 percent of males.

When the gender gaps for all NAEP subjects are expressed in a common metric—the difference in average scores in standard deviation units—the difference between male and female students in writing is considerably greater than for any other subject. [The gap in reading also favors females, but by a smaller margin. In math and science, males have slightly higher average scores than females.]

NAEP cannot explain why the writing gap is so large. Social factors and developmental differences may well be involved; however, some data from the NAEP background questionnaires are noteworthy and may provide us with clues (though they can’t properly be used to prove cause and effect).

- According to the questionnaires, 53 percent of the female students in grade 12 agree or strongly agree with the statement, “Writing is one of my favorite activities.” For males the percentage agreeing or strongly agreeing is just 35 percent. Regardless of gender, those who like writing more write better—though of course it isn’t clear whether writing well or enjoying writing comes first.
- Girls also report writing more than boys do both for homework and on their own. Like almost everything else students do, writing becomes better and faster with practice, and the NAEP data show students who write four to five pages a week for English/language arts homework score higher than those who write fewer pages. Simply stated, to become a writer, one must write, and on average girls report writing more than boys. It is troubling to me, though, that 39 percent of 12th-graders overall report writing just one page of homework or less each week for English/language arts.

While the reasons for the gender gap aren’t clear, knowing there is such a wide gap means teachers and school districts can address it in their classes.

The NAEP Writing Assessment gives no separate scores for the three types of writing assessed—narrative, explanatory, and persuasive—but a special analysis makes clear what many teachers and employers already know: More students are able to write a story or convey experience (either real or imagined) than to write a sound explanatory or persuasive text. Explaining and persuading are the types of writing that use evidence and logic. They are crucial to doing well in college and on the job. Yet, students had the most difficulty with these tasks.

Because of the value of effective argument, the Common Core standards put particular emphasis on developing students’ ability to write sound essays, based on evidence, that seek to inform, explain, and persuade. The weakness many students have in this area is cause for considerable concern.

The NAEP results show that even though many students can write fairly simple narratives and explanations, most of their writing falls far short of the well-organized, well-developed prose that connects with those they are trying to reach. The modest proportion reaching the *Proficient* level is disappointing, especially since success in our economy is increasingly based on knowledge and information—and the ability to communicate that effectively in writing. Good writing is needed for college and increasingly in the workplace as well. Indeed, the impact of poor writing skills on future income and life chances is becoming more substantial.

These results underscore the need to improve writing instruction. The Common Core State Standards can serve as the guidepost for doing so. To improve writing proficiency in our schools, students should have many opportunities to write each week and be able to compose and revise their writing on computers. The expectations for writing must be raised across the curriculum as a vital part of raising standards and achievement for all our students.